

# Structure and Archetype

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Myth and ritual, their nature, function and mutual relationship, have occupied a central place in the study of religions, not least as a result of the impetus given by ancient near eastern studies. T. H. Gaster has made significant contributions to these studies and has, on more than one occasion, entered his protest against an interpretation of myth which overemphasized its reference to a primordial, founding, archetypal event. In the context of Gaster's criticisms the term "archetypal" is to be understood in a very specific sense—or rather in two distinct though similar senses: the founding "charter" myth *à la* Malinowsky, and the paradigmatic, "prototypal" archetype as a "founding event" *in illo tempore*, familiarized through the writings of Mircea Eliade. Gaster's criticisms seem to have been aimed at the connotation which "archetype" possesses in some of Eliade's work rather than at the terminology of Jungian analytical psychology. And although neither myth-and-ritual nor the Jungian archetypes seem to be major preoccupations of the more recent trends in comparative religion, the problems which they have raised still are of sufficient interest to merit the attention of students of human culture in general and of religion in particular. There are many reasons for such a continued interest, not the least significant among them being the intriguing similarities and the equally intriguing dissimilarities of symbolic (mythical and ritual) structures. The following paragraphs are meant as a modest contribution towards a clarification of the problems and the terminology involved.

Symbols, whether of the cultural and collective kind (of which myth is but one species), or of the more individual variety encountered by the practicing psychotherapist, are generally held to be expressive as well as active in diverse ways. They can be traumatizing, healing, affirming, confirming, and even transforming. In fact, symbols are dynamically expressive. As one writer has put it:

The traumatizing power of any given situation cannot result from its intrinsic characteristics, but rather from the capacity of certain events occurring in an appropriate psychological, historical, and social context to induce an affective crystallization which takes place in the mold of a pre-existing structure.

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The following paragraphs are part of a larger study which will contain the full apparatus of footnotes and references, omitted in the present paper. The literature on both structuralism and analytical psychology is so immense that practically every sentence in this essay could be accompanied by pages of bibliographical references. The author has decided, for the sake of brevity, to forego these at the risk of offending the accepted standards of academic writing.

Relative to the [concrete] event or anecdote, these structures...are non-temporal ...The totality of these structures is what we call the unconscious....The unconscious [thus] ceases to be the refuge of individual particularities or the depository of a unique history....It is but a term designating a function: the symbolic function which is, no doubt, human but which operates with all men according to the same laws. In fact, it [the unconscious] is the totality of these laws.

The above quotation may almost, though not quite, appear to be taken from C. G. Jung. In fact it is taken from C. Lévi-Strauss (*Anthropologie Structurale* [1958], 223-24). In the same article Lévi-Strauss insists that:

the unconscious is always empty or, more precisely, it is alien to its images as the stomach is alien to the food that passes through it.

The unconscious thus is the *organon* of a specific function and it imposes its structural laws—in fact, it is nothing but these structural laws—on all kinds of elements coming to it and serving as its raw material (for example, drives, emotions, representations, memories). “The vocabulary matters less than the structure.”

This structuralist manifesto is further elaborated by a statement to the effect that

these structures are not only identical for all...but their number is also limited. Hence we can understand why the world of symbolism exhibits an infinite diversity as regards its contents, but is always limited by its laws. There are many languages, but very few phonological laws that are valid for all languages.

The supratemporal (or atemporal) character of these structures is referred to also in other passages, two of which may be quoted here:

The structure is not produced by an experience from outside and there is no answer to the question whether the structure of the soul...ever originated. The structure is something pre-given.

Or again:

The changes that happen to man are not of an infinite variety, but variations of basic patterns...and their number is limited.

The perspicacious reader will have guessed that the last two quotations were taken not from Lévi-Strauss but from C. G. Jung. What both writers have in common is a view of the unconscious as the basic structural reality without which neither individual nor cultural and social phenomena can be properly understood. Yet in spite of the emphasis on structure and form in some of his formulations, Jung exhibits an unmistakable orientation towards contents, which makes the tenor of his writings so very different from the declared (and perhaps overstressed?) formalism of the so-called structuralists. Nevertheless Jung insists that

archetypes are *Bereitschaftssysteme*, and they are both image and emotion. They are inherited with the structure of the brain. In fact they are the mental aspect of the latter.

This is just another way of saying that

the laws that determine the activity of the brain and which are reflected  
in a certain measure by mythology are, of course, universal.

The last quotation is, of course, from Lévi-Strauss and not from Jung. No doubt Lévi-Strauss would agree that this "common syntax" which expresses itself, among other things, also in dreams, has a physiological basis. But these common features, detectable underneath the varieties of culture, refer to purely formal properties and do not bear on contents and images.

Jung is more than ambiguous on this point. His starting point as a psychotherapist was the encounter with very specific, and even 'numinously' powerful contents (images, symbols), and he tried to formulate an hypothesis that would account for the occurrence of similar images in space and time, in individuals as well as in collective culture patterns. Around 1919 he discarded the term 'primordial images', substituting for the latter what seemed to him at the time a more adequate terminology. Archetypes were now conceived as *Bereitschaftssysteme*, a set of a priori possibilities, a kind of *facultas performandi*. Instead of the historical acquisition and hereditary transmission of experiences (namely, patterns of experiences), Jung now spoke of the archetypes as being given together with human nature and as the atemporal "pure and unadulterated nature" of man. At times the reader of Jung almost feels like wanting to substitute *l'esprit humain* for "psyche." In order to avoid the impression that he was referring to specific contents and primordial images, Jung introduced the distinction between the archetype per se, forever and by definition unconscious, and its expression and concretization in archetypal representations. Jung returns to this point more than once, as if to defend himself against interpretations that would attribute to him a material conception of the archetypes. There are no unconscious representations; the archetypes are a purely formal and "empty" principle. This latter, almost Lévi-Straussian, definition occurs very explicitly in Jung's writings. The archetypes are "a potential axial system, like an invisible crystal lattice in a solution," and they "possess no material existence." Jung's own associations of ideas range from Bergson's *éternels incréés* to the Kantian doctrine of a priori "categories," and they also include the more sociological usage of *catégories* as found in Hubert and Mauss. In fact, the Kantian a priori categories are very much lurking in the background of some of Jung's discussions of his archetypes.

These repeated assertions do not, however, answer the basic question and hence do not always sound convincing. Jung's comparison of archetypes with instincts is very revealing in this respect. The instincts, according to Jung, are determined in a formal sense only and have no existence except in their concrete actualizations; the same hold true of the archetypes. This concept of structure as a pattern and a pre-given *facultas performandi* of certain concrete modes of behavior (including imagining) is certainly very different from the structuralist understanding of 'structure', and Jung never succeeded, in spite of his formalist assertions, in shaking off the material associations of contents, representations, primordial images and specific symbols. It is no accident that the analogy with the structures and *Bereitschaftssysteme*, which the writings of many ethologists since K. Lorenz have popularized also among non-biologists, has been invoked with increasing frequency in Jungian literature. Without going into the question which forms of behavior are predetermined by heredity and which require an appropriate stimulus or *Auslöser*, or a concrete experience of "imprinting," in order to turn a latent

*Bereitschaftssystem* into an actual behaviour pattern, there can be no doubt that the ethologists are talking about very concrete and very specific patterns and contents. It is precisely the eagerness with which the tempting ethological analogies are pressed that raises the gravest doubts as to the applicability of these concepts in the realm of anthropological, that is, cultural, historical and social, studies—including the study of religions. Many Jungians seem to repeat in their own way Ardrey's fatal mistake in extrapolating and applying Lorenz's views on aggression to historico-social phenomena and, e. g., "explaining" wars in terms of a "territorial imperative." Similarly Jungian authors evince a tendency to use the writings of the biologist A. Portmann to buttress the theory of archetypes, although it was precisely Portmann who—perhaps more than any other writer—insisted that the hereditary systems of biology are of little relevance to the problems of "sociocultural heredity," namely, transmission facing the student of human societies (cf. especially A. Portmann, *Biologie und Geist* [1956], 117-48, 194f.).

Students of culture in general and of religion in particular are not so much interested in Jung's psychological theories for their own sake as in their usefulness for dealing with cultural, historical and social, that is, "collective" phenomena. It was, after all, Jung himself who insisted that the archetypal was collective, and that only the contents of the 'collective unconscious' deserved to be designated as archetypes. This reference of structures and archetypes to collective (or universal) realities, namely, patterns, requires some clarification.

Of course students of history, culture and religion need neither Jung nor Lévi-Strauss to tell them that their areas of study exhibit regularities, patterns, structures, etc., and that these structures are very often unconscious, that is, exist in a very real sense even though beyond the consciousness of those who practice them and through (namely, in) whom they manifest themselves. At the risk of appearing almost childishly naive, one could say, by way of simile, that not every speaker of a language knows its structure, that is, its phonology, grammar and syntax. A language is a "collective" entity, cultural and not innate, learned (that is, culturally transmitted and acquired) and not biologically inherited; and in learning it (namely, in being socialized into it and "internalizing" it) the speakers "unconsciously" assimilate those implicit laws and structures which only the grammarians know consciously and explicitly. These laws and structures are in a sense "unconscious" since—except in the case of "invented" and artificial languages like Esperanto—they exist long before the grammarians formulate them and render them "conscious."

This outrageously simplistic example has been chosen very deliberately, because, like language, there are many other, highly complex, cultural patterns and systems which are transmitted from one generation to another (and also changed in the process). It is surely legitimate to say that this cultural transmission includes not only the explicit and manifest contents, but also the nonexplicit or even totally "unconscious" structures. No analysis of a cultural system is complete without an account of its implicit, underlying, unconscious patterns, their nuances, the range of possibilities for which they allow, and the individual as well as collective "maneuvering space" which they keep open or, conversely, close. On inquiring in greater detail into the ways in which these latent and unconscious structures are transmitted together with the manifest and explicit contents of a cultural system, one might discover that the combined insights of Durkheim and Freud (when properly modified and reformulated) do explain much more—and explain it much better—than

Jung's attempts to deal with these same problems. The processes of socialization and of the internalization of cultural systems (including their "unconscious" structures) are not a matter of explicit learning but rather the kind of unconscious learning which is the structuring of the individual unconscious by the osmotic pressure of the collective, socio-cultural, surrounding unconscious. One would certainly agree with Jung that there is a collective, transpersonal and objective unconscious, but its nature is very different from that envisaged by Jungian theory. Jung seems to have seen two possibilities only: spontaneous manifestations of an archetype from the depths of the psyche (that is, from "inside"), or the transmission, acquisition, and learning of specific material contents from "outside" (cf., for example, *Von den Wurzeln des Bewusstseins* [1954], 94-95). The possibility that objectively existing, cultural (that is, collective) yet unconscious structures might be unconsciously assimilated and internalized into the individual unconscious does not seem ever to have occurred to Jung. What has been suggested here, in discussing Jung, as an alternative "possibility," is merely a paraphrase of Talcott Parsons's well-known and elaborately argued theories. According to this view of the social system, society and cultural shape not only the superego (as Freud saw it), but also the *id*. It is precisely this kind of sociological reflection on the mechanisms of the cultural transmission of "unconscious" structures that is demanded by Portmann's aforementioned considerations; and it is precisely this challenge which analytical psychology has so far failed to take up.

Why then the special attraction which Jung's analytical psychology has for students of religion—or at least for some of them? The answer seems to be related to Jung's essentially phenomenological approach. It is this approach which also seems to make it the exact opposite of any true structuralism. This is not the place or occasion to discuss the philosophical implications of either analytical psychology or structuralism, let alone phenomenology. I do not intend to discuss here the role of either Jungian psychology as a "new religion," or of Lévi-Straussian structuralism as a new philosophical (post-existentialist) gospel. Our present concern is with the methodological aspects and usefulness of these theories.

Jung repeatedly claims to be an inductive empiricist. Most empirical psychologists and many medical psychiatrists would most emphatically deny this claim, and surely Jung's own work does not always bear out his contention. But there can be little doubt that Jung's intention is phenomenological, and bent on an "understanding" (*Verstehen*) of phenomena for what they are, without forcing them into the straitjacket of a reductionist theory. If, in this context, the term archetype is meant to convey that a symbol can have a high charge of transformative power, then the term is not particularly helpful. In fact, it merely adds another confusing word to our confused vocabulary. If, on the other hand, the emphasis is on the "collective" character or the unconscious roots of a particular symbol, image, or behaviour pattern, then this alleged explanation turns into an objection. For once we accept the "archetypal" character of a symbol as an explanation of its occurrence in different places and at different times, then we must also explain why it does not occur in ever so many other places and at ever so many other times. To reply that a certain archetype manifests itself because it is "constellated" is merely begging the question. So far no Jungian psychologist has bothered to take, for example, Murdock's *World Ethnographic Sample*, and systematically examine the presence or absence of "archetypes." The impressive amount of material adduced by

Jung and his followers is illustrative and anecdotal in character; it is not of a nature to establish a scientific theory. In this respect it shows affinity with the so-called phenomenology of religion which likewise defies all verification. It may be illuminating and suggestive, but it is not, in the technical sense, scientific.

This brings us back to a point mentioned earlier in the discussion. Despite the attempt to define archetypes as formal structures, "empty" patterns and the like, Jung is really concerned with contents. It was at this point that the apparent (and perhaps more apparent than real?) contrast with structuralism became evident. The Lévi-Strauss rejection of phenomenology (and Lévi-Strauss has some very harsh words to say on the subject) as well as of Jungian psychology (on which he has some equally harsh things to say) is of one piece. *Tristes Tropiques* is not only a fascinating intellectual autobiography; it is an equally fascinating methodological document describing an anthropologist's despairing realization of the impossibility of a phenomenological *Verstehen* of his fellow man and the latter's culture. And since the fortress of other cultures and mental lives cannot be taken by phenomenological assault, the only remaining alternative for a valid anthropology is provided by the methods and models of structural linguistics, communication theory and cybernetics. According to Lévi-Strauss the Jungians "mystify" themselves, and he does not hesitate to charge them with "obscurantism." On a less practical and more theoretical level, the "Jungian approach is entirely mistaken because it is based wholly on the consideration of content and not at all of form."

At this point, and before returning to the question of content and form, we may legitimately raise the same question regarding 'structure' that has previously been raised with regard to 'archetype': what is this somewhat vague and imprecise term good for, and what explanatory purpose does it serve apart from providing one more tautological definition? Most people who talk about structures define it, in the dictionary way, by offering a string of synonymous terms—the surest sign that the word is really superfluous. To define structure as pattern, *Gestalt* (or *Gefüge*), coherent system, or system of relations is as correct and—at times—helpful as it is essentially trivial. One does not have to be a structuralist in order to know that the whole is more than the sum of its parts. The studies which have most significantly deepened our understanding of, and insight into, structural relations (for example, Merleau-Ponty's *structures de comportement* and Kurt Goldstein's classic *Aufbau des Organismus*) have done so by means of a phenomenological analysis of specific material, that is, by the analysis of the characteristic interdependence of the parts of an organic system. But their underlying conception of the nature of 'structure' does not go beyond the traditional commonplaces. Our question could be reformulated by asking in what respect the "structures" of the structuralists are different from those of the traditional gestaltists and phenomenologists. For it seems that whatever the differences in method and subject matter of the various "structuralists," they do seem to share a common notion of 'structure'.

Ignoring, for our present purpose, the structuralist philosophy concerning the nature of the *esprit humain*, we find as a kind of common denominator not merely the recognition of entities or patterns as systems, but the analysis of these systems by a deductive method. The verification of a structuralist analysis would thus consist in showing that deductive predictions (or at least deductive statements) are borne out by the phenomenal contents of the realities studied. Hence there is no one structural method,

but a structuralist type of system theory. In its practical application the method depends on, and varies with, the subject matter (linguistics, sociology, anthropology, economics, mythology etc.) An especially important feature of structuralist system theory is the notion that the analysis has to bear on contrasts (binary oppositions) and not on content. The best known illustration of this approach, and one that is easily grasped even by a novice in structuralist studies, is Lévi-Strauss's treatment of totemism.

A clear distinction has therefore to be made between a merely descriptive structuralism which simply says that a system is a system (that is, that it consists of interdependent parts) and that the whole is more than the sum of its parts, and a structuralist system-theory, the assertions of which can be verified, or at least falsified, by comparing its deductive statements with the facts. Evidently some systems lend themselves more easily than others to structural analysis. It is easier to analyze a pseudohistorical genealogy or the Kariëra kinship system, than the cultural and symbolic system of a complex society. Depending on the subject matter, the criteria of structural analysis must range from verification to mere probability. In fact structural analysis often consists of showing not that, or how, certain elements can combine to form a coherent system, but rather that certain combinations are "logically" impossible.

There is, therefore, a misleading ambiguity about the term 'structure'. We have the content-oriented structures of the phenomenological tradition, and the purely formal structures of "structuralism." This preliminary, though by no means final, distinction can be illustrated—and incidentally modified—by a rather obvious but none the less instructive comparison.

The study of symbols, of whatever kind, is concerned with interpretation and with the question of meaning. Jung once remarked, in one of his most profound sayings, that a symbol could never be defined but only translated—into another symbol! In Jungian practice this translation is effected very often by means of association and "amplification"; it remains therefore content-oriented. Lévi-Straussian analysis too requires constant translation, but the translation is made according to rules of permutations and combinations that are supposed to reflect the formal qualities of binary oppositions.

The comparison may, however, also suggest that the contrast is less extreme than appears at first sight. The starting point of structuralism is a commitment to maximum formalization; it is essentially a system theory, and it finds "meanings" not in specific contents but in patterns of oppositions. And yet, in actual practice, Lévi-Strauss deals with content. The volumes of *Mythologiques* pile content upon content to buttress a formal system which somehow never seems to close satisfactorily. For Jung, on the other hand, the structural and formal definitions of the archetype are not so much a starting point as an attempt to provide a theory for an overwhelming mass of empirical material. As a psychologist, Jung faced content in the consulting room no less than in the contemplation of mythologies and rituals. No doubt Jung's theoretical formulations changed over the years with accumulating experience and continuing reflection. In his interpretation of symbols he moved from an individual to a collective (though not to a cultural and anthropological-sociological) conception, and in his definition of archetypes the emphasis shifted from innate images to innate structures. But this historical account, however true, gives us a half-truth only, and perhaps, for that matter, the lesser half. The other half is the recognition that the concept of archetype, as current in analytical

psychology, is ultimately destroyed by excessive formalization precisely because it was originally designed to assist the phenomenological understanding of specific mental and cultural phenomena. Theoretical reflection drove Jung to definitions of a formal-structural appearance; but the weight of the material as well as his basic intention gave birth to almost logically inevitable ambiguities and inconsistencies. Lévi-Strauss starts out with the pure gospel of formalized structuralism, but as he exemplifies and elaborates his theory, the wealth or material content engulfs and overwhelms the formal intention.

Structure and archetype—perhaps the twain may never meet, but as we look at them more closely we find that neither are they all that far apart.